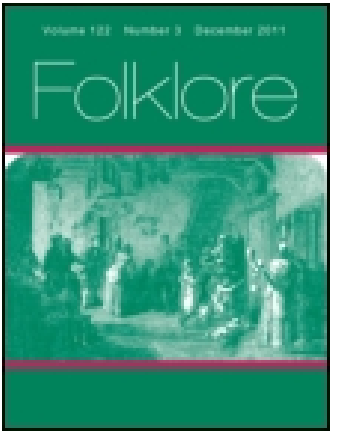

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ITALIAN FOLK-SONGS.

1. *Canti Popolari del Piemonte:* pubblicati da Costantino Nigra. Roma, Firenze, Torin: Loescher. pp. xl, 600.
2. *Chants populaires du Bas-Quercy.* Recueillis et notés par M. Emmanuel Soleville. Paris: Champion, Quai Voltaire. pp. v, 352, and of Music, 108.
3. *Usi e Costumi del Trentino.* Rovereto: N. Bolognini, Tipografia Roveretana. pp. 88.

IN one important branch of folk-lore—folk-songs—Italy has in Count Costantino Nigra as indefatigable a student in the North as Dr. Giuseppe Pitré has proved in the South. The closely printed volume of imperial octavo which heads our notice is a monument of careful and loving work, the enthusiasm of the artist gilding the toil of the conscientious workman.

Hitherto the folk-songs of Italy have been best known to us by the love-songs, which are the prevailing form of popular rhymes in the central and southern portions of the Peninsula. But the Piedmontese, like all mountain peoples, are stirred in their inner life by rhythmical memories of heroic deeds at least equally with the absorbing and universal claims of love. Hence it is doubtless of right that our author has devoted his chief study to the homely epics which may be said to be almost the speciality of the countrymen of his province. The love-songs however hardly get fair treatment. They are crowded breathlessly into a few pages, without a word of translation, comment, or comparison, and not so much as the space of a line to separate one from another, and suggest to the reader to pause and consider the beauty of their rhapsodies. We are told in the prefatory treatise

(p. xix) that the *Strambotto* and the *Stornello* are the indigenous productions of Southern Italy. "The poetry of Southern Italy is generally lyrical, that of Northern Italy narrative." The etymology of the word *Strambotto* has naturally suffered, equally with the samples of the kind of song, from the preference which attracts our author to a more purely national study, and I think that the authors whom I have followed in this matter (*Folk-Songs of Italy*, Prefatory Treatise, p. 18) have the best of the argument. The most interesting of the samples supplied have found a place in my collection.

Count Nigra has treated the narrative rhymes in an entirely different manner. Their nature, history, sources, variants, migrations, parallels, have all been made the subject of the most careful research and study. We are presented with 146 *Canzoni*, ranging from the earliest glimmer of tradition down to the days of Napoleon's conscripts; collected in numbers from different localities in various dialects, painstakingly collated; rendered into Italian intelligible to all, and quite a little treatise on each, tracing its branch-variants up to a parent group-stem, and then following that stem through its multiform root-suckers in various countries—Provence, France, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavia, England, and Scotland.

Only those who have in any degree pursued some attempts of the kind can have any idea of the exasperating labyrinths into which such researches must lead. Caring nothing for the tortuous and torturing divagations into which they are leading the student, light-hearted peasants have in the course of ages woven their tales, in rhyme as well as prose, into a kind of texture from which at our date it has become almost an impossible thing to draw the several threads. A song imported by an itinerant minstrel is certain to be caught up, and the heroic deeds it celebrates ascribed to the local favourite. This is bad enough, but what is tenfold more misleading, yet equally frequent, there results from this treatment, that a song may be centuries

older than the historic event which it seems composed to narrate in the form in which we first meet it. When it passes into a fresh country under its second or third transformation, it is clear that the most scholarly brain cannot all at once track its deviation. Of course there are numerous indications of manner, of metre, of rhyming plan, of etymological idiosyncrasy, etc., constituting the grammar of the subject, by which the student guides himself; but such will-o'-the-wisps as folk-songs may lead the most practised guide to the edge of a precipice.

In truth, however, the grammar of this most perplexing manner has yet to be made, and such conscientious and intelligent investigations as Count Nigra's it is which go far towards building up such a grammar. If all folk-lorists do not accept all his conclusions in every instance, each cannot but be grateful to him for the grand pioneering work he has done, as few could, and for laying the solid bases of a whole edifice of conclusions in the future which could never have been attained without such primary support. Count Nigra does not come before us as a new man. Though one of Italy's foremost diplomatists, and lately the representative of Italy at our Court, he has found time for continual explorations in the regions of folk-lore, and ever since the year 1854 folk-lorists have been beholden to his contributions in the *Romania* and elsewhere of the popular rhymes of his native country. Votaries of the science well knew that the publication of his large and exhaustive collection was delayed for the sake of perfecting his historical and philological conclusions concerning them.

The collection of folk-songs before us from Bas-Quercy is a scholarly work; the author has not gone so deeply into the history of his songs as Count Nigra, but he has given more attention than any folk-lorist has hitherto done to their melodies. This is a singular feature, which may make his collections specially attractive to many. Though not very easy to form an opinion of the sound of a dialect so

unfamiliar, these songs nevertheless convey the idea of being pervaded with remarkable rhythmicality, and the refrains which nearly all of them contain provide them with a great facility for harmoniousness.

To many English readers probably the locality of Bas-Quercy is, to say the least, not familiar; it may not be out of place, therefore, to mention that the origin of the name of the district is ascribed to its having been inhabited by *les Cadurci* at the time of the Roman invasion. It now constitutes the department of Lot and part of the Tarn et Garonne; Montauban was its capital.

The first song of this collection, "Escribeto", is a counterpart of one to which Count Nigra has devoted more attention than any other in his series, in fact, a whole tenth of his book, under the title of "Il Moro Saracino". 'Guilhalmes' in the one, 'Bel galant' in the other, marries a maiden so young that she cannot so much as dress herself alone: this homely detail is absent from no version. He goes to the wars, leaving her in his mother's charge—*per la laissa grandi*—but while he is gone, "el gran Moro Sarazi" (Nigra), "lous Morous sarrasis" (Soleville), carry her off. He comes back at the end of seven years, and when he learns what has happened, he swears he will do nothing till he has found her, though he perish in the attempt. "S'i n'a duveissa mûri" (N.), "Quand saurivi de mouri" (S.). He takes his sword with the gold hilt, but he goes forth dressed as a pilgrim, till he meets three washerwomen plying their industry at the foot of a great castle. This introduction of unromantic *lavandere* is insisted on in every one of Nigra's seven versions, as well as (*labairos-lababoun linge fi*) in Soleville's, and recalls a similarly curious instance in the song of Piedmont at pp. 162-5 of my collection. I have attempted to account for it,[1] and in the instance I was commenting on the laundress

[1] "This song is a strange mixture of sublime symbolism and every-day usage. The siren passes into the washerwoman—Undine into the laundress."

actually woos the knight beneath the water, giving colour to the suggestion; but the present instance seems to show that nothing is intended beyond a homely and prosaic fact. Of the washerwomen the pilgrim learns that this is the castle of the very Saracen Moor of whom he is in search. Begging under the windows, he obtains a sight of his maiden (Fiorensa in Piedmont, Escribeto in Bas-Quercy). As he takes the alms from her hand she recognises by the ring he wears that he is indeed her husband, though she had just been in doubt "that anyone could have come so far as from her country except it had been a swallow, who flies the whole livelong day". But when she is satisfied it is he, she instructs him how to find the swiftest horse in the stable, and carry her off, pretending she is his bag of oats for the horse. One or two of the Piedmontese versions wind up with the Moor's complaint: "To think that I should have had her seven years, and never so much as touched her hand!" This is wanting in the one from Bas-Quercy, but in nearly every other detail it is identical.

Count Nigra rightly calls this one of the most charming of folk-songs, and he has bestowed infinite pains in the study of its origin and wanderings; and we refer our readers to his treatise on it, not only for its intrinsic interest, but as a fine specimen of his analytical instinct.

Another instance of great beauty is the group of songs classed by Count Nigra as *Fior di Tomba*, and in his analysis of these there is much to interest the folk-lorist of every country; for no nationality is without this incident. Is this not because there is a sublime meaning of the mind and soul underlying the pretty love-conceit of the heart? Expressed tersely by Jean Paul, "The bier is the cradle of heaven." The light for her lover's eyes which glowed round the tomb of Beatrice opened Paradise to him and to us.

The group of the Donna Lombarda[1] is treated of course

[1] Busk's *Folk-Songs of Italy*, p. 160.

at great length by Count Nigra, as has also the group which has hitherto gone by the name assigned to it by Gaston Paris of "Jean Renaud",[1] but which Nigra shows would be better entitled "*Morte occulta*". We find this group represented in Soleville's collection under the name of "Lou Counte Arnaud" (p. 13).

The *Canto* dissected by Count Nigra under the name of *Un' Eroina* (p. 90), "El fiol dij signuri cunti s'a l'è chiel n'in va ciamè", appears in Bolognini's *Usi e Costumi del Trentino*, p. 37, under the name of "Montiglia". "Lustrissimo sior Conte se vorlo maridar." *La falsa Monaca* of Nigra, p. 407, in Bolognini, p. 35, as *La Monichella.*

Soleville limits himself to genuine songs (*Chants*), but Count Nigra and Bolognini both furnish us besides with many rhymed traditions and folk-sayings; and Bolognini with several tales not rhymed, as well as some localised legends of various vales and peaks of the Trentino.

Among Nigra's rhymed legends occurs the ever-beautiful one of "Sant' Alessio", p. 538, the highest reach of sublime abnegation ever fabled of hero or saint—a sacrifice beyond that of Abraham. In pointing out details which, not occurring in the "Golden Legend" or in the "Bollandists", prove this to be a pure folk-tradition, Count Nigra omits to trace it, as he might fairly do, to an absolutely Roman source. The church of Sant' Alessio, on the Aventine, keeps alive the perpetual memory of the historical outline of the story—the pathetic tale which in all its long rhymed length many of the people know by heart, was, indeed, like numerous others of the same class, printed, as he says, at Bologna; but when it was first printed there, Bologna was a Papal city, and it was the Roman tradition which was carried there to be printed. The "Story of Dives", p. 543, in Italy called "Il Epulone", introduces the curious episode of its having been to our Lord in His own person, and not in that of the beggar Lazarus, that he refused alms. At

[1] Busk, *Folk-Songs of Italy*, pp. 161 *seq.*

p. 550 we have several versions of the familiar English folk-prayer —

> "Matthew, Mark, Luke, John,
> Bless the bed that I lie on."

Among nursery rhymes, we find, at p. 555, one about a cat, conceived much in the same form as our English one—

> "Pussy-cat, Pussy-cat, where have ye been?
> I've been to Lunnun to see the queen.
> Pussy-cat, Pussy-cat, what did you there?
> Eat up the little mouse under her chair."

Some nonsense verses, p. 561, are identical in form with some given by Bolognini at the beginning of his collection.

Bolognini is also strong in popular lyrical compositions. Although his volume has rather the genial character of the mountaineer's writing than the scholarly tone in which the other two volumes are conceived, it is yet an invaluable collection, for the writer is guided by the true instincts of a born folk-lorist; he knows and loves the people and enjoys their confidence, and he writes down what he receives from them exactly as they give it him, never led astray into improving on their diction.

It is of course in the work of Count Nigra that the chief scientific interest must be sought, and English folk-lorists will have to make themselves masters of his deductions, whether for adhesion or discussion, before they can arrive at any classification of European folk-songs.

R. H. Busk.